

# COVID-19 SUPPORT TO PARTNERS AND STAKEHOLDERS

## ISSUE SUMMARY:

Having drinking water and wastewater services that are fully operational is critical to containing COVID-19 and protecting Americans from other public health risks. The water sector and its workforce are working to keep vital water services operational despite several challenges posed by COVID-19. These challenges include potential worker shortages, potential chemical supply chain shortages or disruptions, and immediate and long-term financial impacts on water utilities due to increased costs from the pandemic and reductions in customer revenue.

## UPCOMING MILESTONES:

- **Late 2020** – Results from the 2020 COVID-19 survey.
- **2021** – Develop website on remedies for supply chain shortages under the Defense Production Act and the Safe Drinking Water Act.

## BACKGROUND:

EPA has let Americans know they can continue to use and drink water from their tap as usual. The COVID-19 virus has not been detected in drinking water supplies. Based on current evidence, the risk to water supplies is low.

Standard treatment and disinfection processes under EPA's regulations at water and wastewater treatment plants are expected to be effective against coronavirus. EPA encourages the public to help keep household plumbing and our nation's water infrastructure operating properly by only flushing toilet paper, not disinfecting wipes nor other items.

EPA is working closely with the water sector through regular engagements to listen and identify opportunities for the Agency to provide support. Additionally, EPA is coordinating the needs of the water sector across the federal government. For example, EPA worked with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to include the water sector workforce, equipment, and chemical suppliers in DHS's Guidance on the Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce.<sup>1</sup>

EPA supports states and cities that have taken proactive measures to ensure continued access to clean and safe water for drinking and handwashing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many drinking water systems are discontinuing service cut-offs, restoring service to customers whose service was previously cut-off, and refraining from imposing penalties for nonpayment. EPA recommends widespread adoption of these practices.

EPA is engaging with the Navajo Nation Water Access Coordination Group (WACG) led by the Indian Health Service and the Navajo Nation, which is coordinating federal, tribal, and non-profit efforts to provide access to drinking water on the Navajo Nation during the pandemic.

Specific and ongoing actions taken by EPA include:

- **Water sector workers:** Collaborated with DHS's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) on the DHS Guidance on the Essential Critical Infrastructure Workforce to help officials identify essential work functions in order to allow workers to access their workplaces during times of community restrictions and to begin planning and preparing for the allocation of scarce resources used to protect essential workers; communicated directly with Governors and tribal leaders to request that the water sector workforce be deemed essential in state and tribal pandemic management plans and orders.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.cisa.gov/publication/guidance-essential-critical-infrastructure-workforce>

- Chemical supply chain: Supporting the water sector to identify potential materials and supply chain challenges and identify solutions to fill potential gaps. For example, EPA provided information on food grade CO<sub>2</sub> (used to adjust pH) for suppliers and producers in the event that water utilities need to identify alternative companies, pursuant to Section 1442(a)(2) of the Safe Drinking Water Act.
- Financial resources: Developed the Water Utility COVID-19 Financial Impact Tool to help drinking water, wastewater, and stormwater (“water”) utilities assess the financial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the utility’s cashflow. Worked with the Federal Tribal Infrastructure Task Force to identify available federal resources, information, and programs to support tribal water systems, including information about funding resources for maintaining operations.
- Compliance assistance: Provided information to help drinking water systems identify alternative certified or accredited labs, if needed, that may be recognized by their state; and to identify alternatives to address diminished capacity at many state and federal labs. Worked with state and local authorities to provide guidance to the animal agriculture sector on reasonable measures for handling animal mortality and excess milk disposal.
- Partnerships: Participating in a National Sewage Surveillance Interagency Leadership effort led by Health and Human Services (HHS) that aims to create a federal framework using wastewater-based epidemiology (WBE) surveillance to track COVID-19 infections, which could provide early warning and potentially estimate infection rates in populations. Collaborating on research with EPA’s Office of Research and Development and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to develop and evaluate methods for detecting different forms of the virus, including the live (i.e., infectious) virus and the genetic marker of the virus in sewage.
- Reopening America: Provided important information to assist in the reopening of America with the release on May 8, 2020, of guidance on Maintaining or Restoring Water Quality in Buildings with Low or No Use. Building and business closures for weeks or months reduce water usage, potentially leading to stagnant water inside building plumbing. This stagnant water can become unsafe to drink or otherwise use for personal or commercial purposes.
- Examples of other EPA actions: Developing and maintaining information that the water sector can use to support operations (e.g., publication of the Pandemic Incident Action Checklist); developed [Frequently Asked Questions](#) to address public inquiries on water and wastewater (updating as needed); developed a public service announcement to amplify the message discouraging flushing of materials other than toilet paper.

#### KEY EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS:

- ☒ Congress
 ☒ Industry
 ☒ States
 ☒ Tribes
 ☐ Media
 ☒ Other Federal Agency  
☐ NGO
 ☒ Local Governments
 ☒ Other: Water and wastewater utilities

#### MOVING FORWARD:

EPA is conducting a comprehensive, nationwide survey of drinking water and wastewater systems to: (1) identify and gauge the severity of the difficulties water and wastewater utilities have experienced or may experience in continuing operations; and (2) collect information that would facilitate EPA planning for a rapid response, if necessary, should there be future problems in the water sector due to COVID-19.

Drinking water utilities and publicly owned treatment works (POTWs) having trouble obtaining critical treatment chemicals or substances during the COVID-19 public health crisis can apply for relief under the Defense Production Act (DPA) and Section 1441 of the Safe Drinking Water Act (SDWA). While EPA is not aware of any ongoing supply chain problems faced by the water sector, SDWA Section 1441, for example, provides a mechanism by which EPA and the Department of Commerce can issue an order to a vendor to provide the necessary amount of the chemical or substance to a drinking water utility or POTW. Neither provision has ever been applied to the water sector and therefore EPA will develop a website for water sector utilities and other stakeholders which will shepherd them through the process of applying for relief under the DPA and SDWA. EPA will provide forms, the generic parts of which EPA will prepopulate for applicants, and instructions on where to submit the forms to streamline the application process.

LEAD OFFICE/REGION: OFFICE OF WATER

OTHER KEY OFFICES/REGIONS: ORD